



## **Balanced Imagination. Enlightenment and/or Imagination in**

### **Friedrich Nicolai**

#### **1. Introduction**

In German literary history, the reception of Friedrich Nicolai (1773-1811) is still under the spell of the refusal which Nicolai met from classicists and romanticists like Goethe and Schiller, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Johann Gottlieb Fichte.<sup>1</sup> This verdict still prevails in many judgments on Nicolai today. However, I argue that two relevant texts by Nicolai contributed to a debate that produced seminal arguments not only on the question of reason versus emotion but also on the question of whether and how Enlightenment needed to determine its boundaries. Both texts are usually considered relatively simplistic attacks on Protestant orthodoxy and on Catholic bigotry, but they also happen to be striking examples for the specific relationship between Enlightenment and imagination in the last third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **2. Sebalduß Nothanker**

Nicolai's novel *Das Leben und die Meinungen des Herrn Magister Sebalduß Nothanker* (1773-75) demonstrates that the tension between an imagination that is hard to control and the real world can be leveled out in literature. Here, it is possible to reintegrate a type of knowledge that is more than rational into the empiricist method of producing knowledge. Researchers have often read this novel as a critique of religious enthusiasm that plainly and ironically shows how eccentric any kind of religious enthusiasm can be. The novel is a satirical attack on sanctimonious Pietists,

on orthodox hubris, on dogmatic intolerance and on the “Verfolgungsgeist” of the Protestant church.<sup>2</sup> But since this novel is also an attempt to practice Enlightenment through satire, as Horst Möller says,<sup>3</sup> I propose to take into consideration the means of the satire, i.e. the narrative level.

In the preface of his novel, Nicolai claims to continue Moritz August von Thümmel’s epic poem *Wilhelmine*, but he also constructs a contradiction towards this ‘hypertext’. Whereas the author of the poem is said to be a poet who did not attempt to obey the correct chronology and did not try to keep his narrative free from all fiction (“Erdichtung”), the narrator of *Sebaldus* promises to give a “veritable biography”, based on complete evidence.<sup>4</sup> He claims to tell a “veritable history”, in which one must not look for “those bold flights of imagination, which constitute the essence of poetry”.<sup>5</sup> The plot of the text is said to consist of ordinary everyday events. The narrator reaffirms this claim several pages later. Unlike Voltaire, he says, truth is supposed to be the essence of this story, “we shall in no one instance [...] misrepresent[...] or forge[...] events, in order to render our narrative more interesting and delectable.”<sup>6</sup> But the story of the novel is not capable of affirming these claims. It is evident that the narrator plays with the dichotomy of fiction and truth that was of high significance to the debate on the novel in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the devaluation of imagination here happens in the mode of a fictional statement which claims to be true, but evidently is not ‘true’ in an extra-literary sense. Nicolai ironically plays with the reader’s expectations and the pseudo-pretension of truth.<sup>8</sup> The plot of the novel is not even plausible; it is a series of improbable, surprising, contingent events that follow a pattern of improbability more than a pattern of reality.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that what the characters say in this novel is a diegetic event. As the characters by no means display only rational, enlightened behavior, imagination itself is connected to the complex of concepts forming the Enlightenment. It cannot be separated from the search for truth and Enlightenment, because it is an anthropological condition that cannot be denied – a condition, though, that has its limits. Imagination cannot give evidence for truth yet it contributes to the progress of Enlightenment.

In the novel, enlightening the home country is described as mandatory for academic disciplines.<sup>9</sup> The duty of the scholars is to disperse Enlightenment to the people. Sebaldu optimistically supposes that this is also the inner need of savants.<sup>10</sup> But here, his conversational partner, an expert in the contemporary book market, uncovers the discrepancy between his ideal and the real world. Sebaldu's ideas are nothing but a 'play of the imagination' which does not match empirical perception: "Your imagination, my dear friend, still soars a world too high. Vouchsafe to descend a step or two, and come a little nearer to our earth."<sup>11</sup> Imagination produces an understanding of Enlightenment that differs largely from reality because the idea of enlightening the public contrasts the market rules of capitalism. The main principle of all booksellers is economic success: "Believe me, my friend, the taste of your great literati does not suit the palate of the public. Now the bookseller, if he is to live by his trade, needs a great number of customers."<sup>12</sup> This is said by the bookseller Hieronymus who was identified as Nicolai's mouthpiece. Scholarly Enlightenment cannot be easily transferred to the populace because the people are not interested in science and because the booksellers are more interested in economic gain than in ideals.<sup>13</sup> The narrator does not criticize the goal of enlightening the people. He claims

to carefully consider the means of Enlightenment according to the anthropological conditions of every human being and according to real society. The main concern of the novel is, in fact, to demonstrate the practical contradictions of the Enlightenment utopia.<sup>14</sup>

But there seems to be a solution: “It is not sufficient that every science be digested into a separate system; – every particular branch ought to be adapted to the whole, and all of them collectively applied to the use and benefit of mankind.”<sup>15</sup> Science can be utilized to have an impact on society. However, this transfer needs to face the relevance of imagination in the real world. Even Wilhelmine, Sebaldus’s wife, who is interested in the Enlightenment and has read rationalist philosophers like Wolff, cannot deny that it is not reason that convinces her but rather her imagination when reading the Enlightenment writer Thomas Abbt. “It completely heated her imagination, which was naturally romantic. She felt enchanted at the reflection, [...] Burning with these sublime ideas, [...].”<sup>16</sup> The imagination of the “passionate admirer of the Belles Lettres” produces her enthusiasm. But emotions and even imagination do not stand in contrast to self-reflexion.<sup>17</sup>

Nicolai’s novel does not only demonstrate that private and public reason need to be connected but it also represents the realistic premise that reason and rationality have to be complemented by emotions and by a moderate, “reasonable” imagination. Imagination is not merely criticized. By characterizing figures and situations, Nicolai sketches the model of a balanced imagination including both its negative and its positive corollaries. He does not deny that imagination is an inevitable and necessary part of human thinking. Whereas, by means of a *pathological* imagination, phantasies

replace affects, cause physical illness and even death<sup>18</sup> and *sentimental* imagination is uncovered and ridiculed in Säugling's "niedlichen Imaginationchen,"<sup>19</sup> the narrator depicts positive corollaries of imagination: Mariane's reading heats up an imagination that represents emotions more clearly, intensely und fiercely than usual. Although extensive reading can also lead to laziness and passivity, a *well-balanced* imagination does not only *not* contradict the Enlightenment but enables its progress.

Even religious diversity and tolerance can result from imagination as we can see in Nicolai's description of the religious situation in Berlin. Imagination (although sometimes exaggerated) has produced a variety of religious attitudes that result in tolerance. In order to be productive, imagination needs to connect with warmth and true emotion. But imagination is always in danger of being engaged by impure intentions. It must not be isolated. "Verstandloses Gefühl" must not decide on "philosophische Wahrheit," and "verwirrtes Träumen einer angebrannten Einbildungskraft" is not the "höchste Schwung der Dichterey."<sup>20</sup> Mariane's kidnapper reads Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* in order to set fire to his imagination through the character of Lovelace.<sup>21</sup> Imagination may also remain a utopia or pure "speculation" that counts on attitudes more than on behavior.<sup>22</sup> An immediate transfer to practical knowledge seems hard to find. A Magister from Leipzig chastises Sebaldu: "Tis yourself rather that are dreaming of Utopia; of the beautiful regions of imagination, [...]."<sup>23</sup> But imagination becomes a part of this criticism because of the limits of human reason, because thinking in this real world does not work as pure reason, because imagination is part of the human condition. In this novel, the empiricist Nicolai relies on a well-balanced model of imagination and reason in order to provide a real-world model of Enlightenment. This understanding of human

behavior seems more adequate than rational philosophy to describe what really happens. Imagination usually does not exaggerate. It is balanced by the reason of every human being, as shown in the character of Mariane.

She is depicted as a new kind of bourgeois woman who, as a self-thinker and a woman in love, combining a tempered imagination with practical reasoning and an interest in sentimental literature with a pragmatic access to what is apt and possible. Moreover, Mariane's mix of imagination and reasoning fuels the story. She tries to forget Säugling because she intends to follow a rationally based morality. But: "Yet the very attempt to confirm her resolution imprinted his memory still more indelibly in her heart, and she rendered her determination abortive by the very means she took to carry it into effect."<sup>24</sup> The effect of imagination is limited by the constant conflict between reason, imagination, and other affects and emotions. Nicolai designs a balanced model that limits imagination through reason and a reasonable morality, but that also sets limits to reason by imagination and imagined utopias. This combination contributes to the progress of the Enlightenment. By denying philosophical systems and stressing the practical relevance of a well-balanced imagination, the novel contributes to the self-reflection of the Enlightenment.

### **3. Beschreibung einer Reise**

Nicolai's multi-volume report on his travels through Southern Germany and Austria, *Beschreibung einer Reise* (1783-1787 / 1795-1796), draws much stronger contrasts between imagination and Enlightenment. In the preface and in the first volume, the author claims that by traveling one can free oneself from prejudices. If the people would travel, they would notice "that in all countries there is good and bad" and "they

would learn to tolerate and love each other.”<sup>25</sup> In the first volume, finding the truth seems to be connected with the process of reflection and the public dispute: “The more you reflect, meditate, compare, are confronted with objections, the more truth unfolds.”<sup>26</sup> Unlike this ideal of debate, Nicolai, in the subsequent volumes, renders his empiricist program of truth more and more absolute: The acquisition of knowledge is only possible through experience, and this experience produces reliable truth by unbiased observation and trustworthy information. In consequence, Nicolai painstakingly tries to avoid elements of fiction by relying on what he takes for facts, data, and findings.<sup>27</sup> The world is the object of reasonable understanding and practical action, not of “dreaming antiquarians.”<sup>28</sup> Following this presumption, Nicolai observes knowledge, industry (i.e. industria), religion, and manners of the countries he travels. Nicolai does not even experience nature and landscape with emotion, he gauges them methodically.<sup>29</sup>

Nicolai’s method remains to a certain extent incomplete: In his *Beschreibung einer Reise*, he is bound to the premise that his own empirically based knowledge cannot be disputed.<sup>30</sup> Objectivity is the main goal he attempts to achieve by adding numerous documents, partly as voluminous attachments. In this empirical process of collection and registration, he tries to avoid premature judgments by regularly reminding himself of the difference between observation and evaluation. Therefore, the “Ideen-Einheit”<sup>31</sup> of the observer needs to be complemented by observations by others in order to result in truth in the end. Nicolai claims to have done this during his journey.

His judgments concerning the role of imagination differ largely from his literary work. Nicolai now declines all imagination because it is said to be nothing but

enthusiasm. Imagination contrasts logic with morality. “All healthy concepts of logic and morality must be confused if someone wants to imagine things like that (the late Jesuit practice of indulgence, R.G.).”<sup>32</sup> Nicolai generalizes: Every aberration from reason, including all imagination, contradicts the Enlightenment. He uses this argument in order to criticize Catholicism for constraining the people, for preventing them from thinking freely. Programmatically, he tries to justify his critical view of Catholicism by stressing the decisive role of emotions and imagination in Catholic practices. “Dark feelings and blind faith” are, according to Nicolai, “prevalent; publicity and openness are being prevented, reason is humiliated.”<sup>33</sup> Imagination, emotion, superstition, and the sway of the clergy suppress human reason in the Catholic regions, as they have done for centuries. Enlightenment, according to Nicolai’s travel report, needs to be reduced to clear dichotomies in order to be able to detect its opponents. As a result of this clear dichotomy, imagination moves over into the camp of threats to the Enlightenment.

Nicolai quotes Moses Mendelssohn’s definition of “Bildung”, “Aufklärung”, and “Kultur.”<sup>34</sup> But in order to delineate the Enlightenment’s territory, Nicolai reduces Mendelssohn’s “philosophy of balance” to the concept of rational free-thinking. In Nicolai’s report, the level of public reflection on all objects of human life which influence the welfare of every individual and of the whole indicates the degree of Enlightenment. Nicolai denies the usefulness of imagination in this process.

“Imagination jumps, creates at will, wants to have effects before the causes exist, sees nothing as it is but only as it desires to see it, wants to have it even better, becomes angry when it is not perceived by others to be so, and imagines that it were so.”<sup>35</sup> This clearly contradicts Mendelssohn who argues that Enlightenment sometimes needs



opposition and that emotions and imagination are part of our reasoning.<sup>36</sup>

Mendelssohn and Nicolai both agree on the goal of spreading the Enlightenment. Yet although Nicolai admits the relativity of culture which must be harmonized with the constitution and with the nation's character, although he declares in his travel journal that knowledge is always historical,<sup>37</sup> although he aims at merging empiricist epistemology with rationality,<sup>38</sup> there is one seminal difference: The means of achieving and spreading knowledge, according to Nicolai, must not be affected by irrationality or any aspect – like imagination – which leads away from truth and reason.

Consequently, Nicolai tries to use clear evidence in order to win over the readers of his travel report. In order to convince the reader of the 'natural truth' he has detected, he uses diagrams and statistical data extensively throughout, e.g. on birth and death rates, on public finances and taxes, even on the prices for postal horses. These are the results of his empirical research, and we cannot deny that he had a lot of new insights into real life in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. But Nicolai not only presents this empirical data in a new form: the world he sees is sorted, analyzed, classified, and encyclopedically annotated.<sup>39</sup> Unlike in *Sebaldu Nothanker*, in Nicolai's *Beschreibung einer Reise* the author himself gives order and meaning to knowledge. He no longer relies on a reader who needs to enlighten himself by reflecting on the positions of the figures in the novel and trying to find out for himself what position is consistent with the progress of the Enlightenment. By radicalizing the empiricist principle, one endangers the possibility of a self-reflective and skeptical reassessment of the order that the author had created.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Climate Changes

Both texts attempt to position themselves in the current social field without dismissing the core goals of the Enlightenment. The changes in Nicolai's understanding of Enlightenment can be read as contributions to the larger debate on the scope, implementation, and boundaries of the Enlightenment, whether they be set by its advocates or by its opponents. There are eight years between the publication of volume 8 and volume 9 of Nicolai's *Beschreibung einer Reise* – from 1787 to 1795.

In the meantime, the intellectual climate in Berlin had vastly changed. In the preface to his 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *Sebaldus* (1799), Nicolai describes this change: “No one could imagine that there would come a time when even in Berlin the public power should try to prevent the Enlightenment of religion and the application of common sense to the most important issues of human life.”<sup>41</sup> This is of central relevance for Nicolai's assessment of the political and social situation in the late 1780s and 1790s. In between were the conservative attacks on Enlightenment, for example Wöllner's edicts.

Moreover, some conservatives tried to instrumentalize the balanced models of Enlightenment which maintained that truth needs to be found by every individual and must not be prescribed by the public, whereas others returned directly to an over-exaggerated imagination and to mysticism.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it is not only Catholicism whose disproportionate, unlimited imagination may endanger Enlightenment. According to Nicolai, Enlightenment is endangered when the connection between reason and emotion in the well-balanced model he proposes is being broken by someone trying to rely on only one of these aspects or – even worse – on authority. Those anti-enlightening tendencies force the Enlightenment onto the defense. Nicolai

increasingly fears that a new irrationalism will arise and gain authority as a principle of state and ecclesiastical leadership – a principle that contrasts to what Nicolai thought was the well-balanced principle of Enlightenment. It seemed inevitable to strengthen one's own principles by minimizing the ambiguities (such as the balanced role of imagination).

Nicolai always remained interested in emphasizing practical knowledge. For this, he needed to use diverse, even contradictory means. Nicolai's insistence on this eclectic position may also resemble narrow-mindedness.<sup>43</sup> But he postulated that every human being is responsible for society's progress towards Enlightenment. Thus, society needs to guarantee the freedom of thought and public debate. This public debate should include imagination as it constitutes a seminal part of practical human cognition.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Nicolai still holds to the idea that there are various paths to truth – even in his travel report: “There are many paths that lead to truth, but no one really reaches it. This would be the end of all philosophy and research.”<sup>45</sup>

PD Dr. Rainer Godel

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg

Exzellenznetzwerk “Aufklärung – Religion – Wissen”

D – 06099 Halle

Germany

[rainer.godel@netzwerk-arw.uni-halle.de](mailto:rainer.godel@netzwerk-arw.uni-halle.de)

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Albrecht, "Nachwort. Ein Leben im Dienst der Aufklärung," in *Friedrich Nicolai. "Kritik ist überall, zumal in Deutschland, nötig." Satiren und Schriften zur Literatur*, ed. W.A. (Leipzig, Weimar: Kiepenheuer, 1987), 477-516, here 477, Klaus L. Berghahn, "Maßlose Kritik. Friedrich Nicolai als Kritiker und Opfer der Weimarer Klassiker," *G. Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 8 (1987): 50-60.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Sigrid Habersaat, *Verteidigung der Aufklärung. Friedrich Nicolai in religiösen und politischen Debatten* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), 13.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Horst Möller, *Aufklärung in Preußen. Der Verleger, Publizist und Geschichtsschreiber Friedrich Nicolai* (Berlin: Colloquium-Verlag, 1974), 80.
- <sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nicolai, *The Life and Opinions of Sebaldu Nothanker*, trans. Thomas Dutton, A.M. 3 Vols. (London: C. Lowndes, 1798), Vol. I, x.
- <sup>5</sup> Dutton, *Sebaldu*, I, xiv.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 122.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Olaf Simons, *Marteaus Europa oder Der Roman, bevor er Literatur wurde. Eine Untersuchung des deutschen und englischen Buchangebots der Jahre 1710 bis 1720* (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2001).
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, "Nicolai oder vom Altern der Wahrheit," in *Friedrich Nicolai. 1733-1811. Essays zum 250. Geburtstag*, ed. Bernhard Fabian (Berlin: Nicolai, 1983), 198-256, here 208.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Friedrich Nicolai, *Das Leben und die Meinungen des Herrn Magister Sebaldu Nothanker. Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Bernd Witte (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991), 79.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Nicolai, *Sebaldu*, 64.
- <sup>11</sup> Dutton, *Sebaldu*, I, 139.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 179.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Bernd Witte, "Nachwort," in Nicolai, *Sebaldu*, 604-614, here 606.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 607.
- <sup>15</sup> Dutton, *Sebaldu*, I, 196 et seq.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 43.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, I, 17.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. Nicolai, *Sebaldu*, 50.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 286.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Dutton, *Sebaldus*, I, 163

<sup>24</sup> Dutton, *Sebaldus*, II, 225.

<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Nicolai, *Beschreibung einer Reise durch Deutschland und die Schweiz, im Jahre 1781*. [...], Vol. 1, (Berlin and Stettin, 1783), ed. Bernhard Fabian, Marie-Luise Spieckermann (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Olms, 1994), VII-VIII. (In the following: RB) trans. R.G., William Waltz, Adam Woodis.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Albrecht, “Nachwort,” 494.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Martens, “Ein Bürger auf Reisen. Bürgerliche Gesichtspunkte in Nicolais ‘Beschreibung einer Reise durch Deutschland und die Schweiz im Jahre 1781,’” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 97 (1978): 561-585, here 562 et seq.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 565.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Möller, *Aufklärung*, 104, Hans-Wolf Jäger, “Der reisende Enzyklopädist und seine Kritiker. Friedrich Nicolais ‘Beschreibung einer Reise durch Deutschland und die Schweiz im Jahre 1781,’” *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schiller-Gesellschaft* 26 (1982): 104-125, here 122.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Albrecht, “Nachwort,” 501 et seq.

<sup>31</sup> RB, XI, 285.

<sup>32</sup> RB, V, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. RB, VII, Preface, VII, Habersaat, *Verteidigung*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> RB, V, 205 et seq., RB, IV, 923 et seq., cf. Martens, “Bürger,” 580, Möller, *Aufklärung*, 499 et seq.

<sup>35</sup> RB, V, 206 et seq.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Moses Mendelssohn, “Öffentlicher und Privatgebrauch der Vernunft” in M.M., *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe. Vol. 8. Schriften zum Judentum. II.*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog, 1983), 225-229, here 227. Cf. Rainer Godel, “‘Eine unendliche Menge dunkeler Vorstellungen.’ Zur Widerständigkeit von Empfindungen und Vorurteilen in der deutschen Spätaufklärung,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 76, no. 4 (2002): 542-576.

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Möller, *Aufklärung*, 499, 516 et sqq., RB, VI, 359.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. RB, XI, 184.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Jäger, “Enzyklopäd,” 107, Möller, “Bürger,” 104.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Rainer Godel, *Vorurteil – Anthropologie – Literatur. Der Vorurteilsdiskurs als Modus der Selbstaufklärung im 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2007), 275 et seq.

<sup>41</sup> Nicolai, *Sebaldus*, 469.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), Jörn Garber, “Drei Theoriemodelle frühkonservativer Revolutionsabwehr. Altständischer Funktionalismus, spätabolutistisches Vernunftrecht, evolutionärer ‚Historismus’,” *Jahrbuch des Instituts für deutsche Geschichte* 8 (1979), 65-101.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Möller, *Aufklärung*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Albrecht, “Nachwort”, 484, Habersaat, *Verteidigung*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> RB, XI, 184.